

Winter use of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge cabins

by Rick Johnston



The cabin at Caribou Island

This is a good time of year to visit one of the public-use cabins on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The longer hours of daylight and moderate temperatures of late February and March make a cabin trip a great family outing. Refuge cabins are open to the public on a first come, first serve basis. There are no charges or reservations; maximum stay is seven days. Most of the cabins have saws to cut firewood and if you're fortunate, the previous user will have left enough stove wood to get you started.

Although these cabins receive some maintenance from Refuge staff, users, and volunteers, this care is infrequent and low key. Users should plan to bring all necessary supplies, including a back-up tent, in case the cabin is in use by another party. Eight of the nine public-use cabins have some type of stove, but the stove and chimney should be carefully inspected before lighting any fires, and monitored closely during operation.

The number of public-use cabins is considerably less than the number of cabins present on the Refuge. There are other structures, historical in character or otherwise, that hikers, skiers, snowmachiners, or others may come across while traveling on the Refuge. A 1984 cabin inventory documented more than 30 existing cabins and several others that were only partially standing. There are probably still a few old historical structures out there that have not yet been discovered.

Structures of relatively recent origin often have finished wood (plywood) or plank construction and are probably trespass structures, whereas historical structures usually have log construction.

Cabin users should remember that historical cabins and any artifacts within or around them are legally protected from disturbance and removal. Refuge regulations and other federal laws are designed to preserve historical information and objects, and forbid any souvenir collecting.

There are also cabins on private inholdings within the Refuge, such as along the northeast shore of Tustumena Lake, which are privately owned and are not generally open to the public.

One of the most accessible public-use cabins is the Finger Lakes cabin, which can be reached by hiking, skiing or snowmachining the Finger Lakes Road. The Finger Lakes Road is closed to public vehicular traffic, but can be used as a trail. The cabin can sleep four in a pinch, and is less than two miles west of Swanson River Road. A Refuge gate blocks the road and serves as a trailhead. The cabin can also be reached by ski plane, and the area has average to good ice fishing. The cabin is located near a small island of large trees within the 1969 Burn, where one often sees moose, lynx, coyote, hare and other wildlife (or at least their tracks). The last time I was there overnight, I heard both coyote and wolves calling. The Finger Lakes cabin was originally built by the Refuge for a scientist doing grouse research. It is of log construction and looks and feels like an Alaskan cabin. I should mention that recent vegetation clearing and other activities associated with the construction of a natural gas pipeline between Wolf Lake and Beaver Creek may put some truck traffic and noise on the otherwise sleepy Finger Lakes Road. Cabin users parking at the Finger Lakes gate should not block the road at the trailhead.

Caribou Island cabin on Tustumena Lake is another very nice destination in late winter. It normally has good ski and snowmachine access, but this year's moderate winter has left ice conditions on the west end of Tustumena Lake too thin for safe travel, other than by water skis. The cabin can still be safely reached by skirting the south shore of the Kasilof River and Tustu-

mena Lake. The log walls, roof and floor of this cabin are in fair to good condition and it can sleep four. The wood supply is relatively poor, and searching for stove wood is one of the pastimes to expect at this otherwise perfect location.

Two favorites for those with ski-equipped aircraft are the Vogel Lake and Trapper Joe Lake cabins. Both are approximately a 30-minute flight from the Kenai-Soldotna area, and several local air taxis with skis can get you there and back safely. The Kiwanis Club of Anchorage and other volunteers maintain these two cabins for public use.

The Trapper Joe cabin looks and feels more like a historical Alaskan cabin because of its earlier period of construction and low-to-the-ground style. It is smaller in size and is easier to heat by stove, and sleeps three to four. The Vogel Lake cabin sleeps four to six. Both lakes have ice fishing and are great places to search for winter wildlife sign. Some snowmobilers have also recently discovered these cabins.

The other Refuge cabins have their own unique locations and challenges. The Doroshin Bay cabin is located in Doroshin Bay on the far northeast side of Skilak Lake and is reached via Skilak Lake or by Hidden Creek Trail in combination with Skilak Lake. When the ice is thick it is easily accessible. Trouble is, even in a cold winter, the upper Kenai River dumps into Ski-

lak Lake and causes either open water or thin ice for a half mile from the mouth. Travelers must skirt the open area toward the main lake to find safe ice. Caution is essential, and I recommend checking with the Refuge before making this trip. Skilak Lake is deep and cold.

The Doroshin Bay cabin can also be accessed by boat in the late winter when Skilak Lake is ice-free. During a moderate winter such as this one, Skilak will remain ice-free for most of the winter, but the Upper and Lower Skilak boat ramps are terribly slick and their use is dicey at best.

Other public-use cabins include Big Indian, Lake Emma, and Pipe Creek. Information of their location, condition and access options is available at Refuge headquarters.

Refuge cabins can give visitors a chance to experience the Refuge during winter months when tent camping seems a little intimidating. The Refuge has a rich and interesting human history, and visiting the cabins can be a great taste of Kenai Peninsula history.

Rick Johnston is a Ranger/ Pilot for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information on Refuge public-use cabins call Refuge Headquarters at 262-7021. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.